



Chapter 3

Preventing School Bullying and Other Hateful Behaviors

Preventing School Bullying and Other Hateful Behaviors



ONE important developmental task for children to learn is a sense of connection or belonging in this world. The experience of being in a family helps children to feel connected, and another important opportunity for connection happens at school. The social experience of belonging at school becomes the foundation for children to assume future social roles and responsibilities.

Fundamental to a school environment that promotes this social connection are respect and trust from peers and from adults. Although much attention is placed on the academic curriculum, the *human* curriculum that is practiced daily through thought, word, and action cannot be ignored. Many schools have formalized this curriculum through classroom instruction in anger management, conflict resolution, and leadership training. Personal and social skills training beginning in the early years of a child's education and articulated throughout his/her school experience can provide an integrated, holistic foundation for building trust and mutual respect and preventing social alienation.



The Role of Peers

STUDENTS are the key to shaping peer norms. Student bystanders (not the bully or the target of bullying) make up a majority of the student body in any school. This population must understand that it has the power to create and promote a school where cruelty and bullying are not tolerated. Students are the most authentic voice for the cause and are capable of helping to tailor and refine prevention and intervention programs and materials that meet the needs of their school.



The Role of Adults

SEVERAL factors collectively contribute to bullying and other antisocial behaviors and may be found both in the home and in the school; these are:

- A punitive environment
- A lack of positive consequences and reinforcement
- Inconsistencies in the rules and the consequences for breaking them
- A lack of awareness of or responsiveness to individual differences, including those related to ethnicity, and a failure to recognize a student's effort or accomplishment

School staff members may not be aware that their personality, demeanor, and conduct may project a generally negative tone that creates a punitive and oppressive environment. The atmosphere they create may not only discourage achievement but also increase aggression and attendance problems, making it virtually impossible to create an optimal classroom environment.¹⁷

Both seasoned and new teachers have to make critical decisions in instruction and classroom management moment by moment throughout a teaching day. Teachers have a strong influence on whether their classroom is a positive or negative environment for students. Whether teachers are making major decisions or minor choices, the tenor of the classroom environment develops around the following basic elements:

- Selection and delivery of appropriate curriculum content
- Student-to-student relationships
- Processes for engaging student participation and learning
- The overall mood and tone of the interactions throughout the day

Connecting these elements to learning and social skills development can be accomplished in subtle and creative ways. For example, connecting curriculum content to social skills development can be accomplished through role modeling and cross-age mentoring or tutoring programs. Fostering student relationships can be accomplished by identifying an appreciation for differences in culture or customs or by illustrating how to ask for help or how to report a bullying incident to someone of authority. It is important for the responsible adult to be consistent in identifying undesirable behavior and praising desirable attitudes and actions.

¹⁷ G. R. Mayer, "Preventing Antisocial Behavior in Schools," *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, Vol. 28 (1995), 467-78.

Connecting social skills development and curriculum content can also be accomplished through classroom processes by recognizing and celebrating individual or group success or by facilitating classroom community meetings. Such meetings provide opportunities for students to do critical thinking and team problem solving. Establishing a classroom protocol for routine activities can promote classroom expectations and maintain consistency and predictability throughout the day.

Teachers project an overall inclusive mood and tone in the classroom by promoting respect, inclusion, and a sense of community and by designing a physical setting that promotes effective instruction and positive social interaction. Posting clear classroom rules, distributing responsibilities fairly among students in the classroom, and acknowledging individual and group accomplishment and success go far in projecting the impression that the classroom is a safe, all-inclusive place.



Research-Based Strategies

THE California Department of Education Web site <http://www.cde.ca.gov/spbranch/ssp> references a collection of resources containing research-proven strategies believed to be effective in preventing or responding to bullying in schools. One of the resources available at this site is the United States Department of Education's *Preventing Bullying: A Manual for Schools and Communities*.¹⁸ The manual confirms that a comprehensive approach is the best model for preventing or reducing bullying.

The earliest and perhaps most well-known antibullying program incorporates the concept of combining prevention strategies and intervention methods that involve several levels of participation. Researcher Dan Olweus implemented this model in primary and middle grade schools in Norway in the early 1980s. To date, Olweus's comprehensive program with concepts for action at the schoolwide, classroom, and individual levels has been selected among the top ten violence-prevention programs by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.¹⁹

The Olweus approach to preventing bullying is built around a limited number of key principles derived from research on the

¹⁸ *Preventing Bullying: A Manual for Schools and Communities*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Education, 1998.

¹⁹ D. Olweus, S. Limber, and S. F. Mihalic, *Book Nine: Bullying Prevention Program*. Blueprints for Violence Prevention series. Boulder, Colo.: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 1999 <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/publications/blueprints/BP-009.html>.

development and modification of problem behaviors, particularly aggressive behavior. To prevent or reduce aggressive behavior, the program seeks to develop a school (and ideally, a home) environment characterized by warmth, positive interest, and involved adults. At the same time the program calls for establishing firm limits to unacceptable behavior. Nonhostile, nonphysical negative consequences are consistently applied, and adults act as authorities and positive role models.

Even though many of the Olweus program measures include the students and their role in changing the climate of the school, this bullying-prevention model is based on the premise that efforts to create a better school environment must be initiated and driven by the adults at school. Adult behavior is critical because the adults at school (and, to some degree, at home) must be aware of the extent of bullying and the victims' problems and be clearly committed to participate in changing the situation.

The Olweus program model suggests schools establish the following activities at the schoolwide, classroom, and individual levels:

Schoolwide Activities

CONDUCT a survey of both the teachers and the students to determine the prevalence of bullying (see Appendix A for sample surveys). Establish a school-level committee consisting of teachers, administrators, counselors, other school staff, school-based mental health professionals, parents/guardians, and students to perform the following tasks:

- Evaluate the survey results.
- Develop a coordinated system for supervising students during break periods, which is when bullying occurs most frequently at school.
- Develop specific plans for implementing a program in which different sources convey a consistent message about the school's views and attitude toward bullying.

The committee would also be charged with program oversight and ongoing coordination of the school's efforts to stop bullying behavior at school.

Classroom Activities

ESTABLISH and enforce rules against bullying. Schedule regular classroom meetings with students to discuss antisocial behavior and agreed-upon rules. Engage students in a variety of activities (e.g., role playing, writing, small-group discussions) that help them

understand the harm caused by bullying. Meet with families to expand their involvement both in class and throughout school.

Individual-Level Activities

INVITE concerned persons (e.g., bullies, victims, and parents/guardians of both the bullies and the victims) to help plan and implement activities. Instruct all school staff to provide immediate intervention in bullying incidents. Help students form cooperative buddy or friendship partnerships to inspire personal responsibility for students who are victims of bullying and to discourage bullying in general. Older students can form mentor partnerships to provide one-on-one support for new students or students who find it particularly difficult to fit in with their peers. Encourage families of bullies and victims to convey concern and support for both the target and the bully and to convince other families to help resolve a current incident and eliminate future incidents of bullying. Include school counselors or mental health professionals to deal with more serious incidents of bullying and to help in the larger, ongoing task of restructuring the social environment of the school.



Actions to Address Bullying in Schools

SCHOOL administrators, teachers, students, and parents/guardians are important partners in developing a bullying-prevention program. Administrators lead the team in analyzing school surveys on the prevalence of bullying behavior. If the survey results reveal that both staff and students believe bullying behavior happens, the team members should look further to see whether they understand what bullying looks like and the extent to which the staff responds to bullying incidents when they occur.

Actions for Administrators

ADMINISTRATORS must act to implement the school's policy against bullying. The following practical actions will support a no-bullying policy:

- Schedule playground supervision and make sure students are monitored in class, hallways, restrooms, the cafeteria, and areas identified in the school survey as "hot spots" for bullying.
- Schedule regular schoolwide assemblies and teacher/staff development to raise awareness and communicate the policy of intolerance for bullying behavior.
- Establish a schoolwide rule that states, "No Put-Downs, No Name Calling."

- Post clear expectations for behavior, including the no-bullying rule and the consequences for breaking that rule.
- Establish a confidential reporting system for students (targets of bullying and bystanders) to safely report details of bullying incidents without fear of retaliation.
- Provide schoolwide and classroom activities designed to build students' self-esteem, such as showcasing special talents, hobbies, interests, and abilities. For example, feature in the school newsletter individual student essays or articles based on student interviews.

Actions for Teachers

TEACHERS are the adults who interact the most with students. In the classroom, on the playgrounds, and in the hallways teachers have daily, direct interaction and influence with students. As such, teachers are powerful role models and establish the tone of a classroom through their methods and personal demeanor. The following ideas for teachers support bully-free schools:

- Provide students with opportunities to discuss bullying and enlist their support in defining bullying as an unacceptable behavior. One way to begin a discussion is to conduct a session on current events with bullying as a topic. Students may share views and experiences.
- Involve students in establishing classroom rules against bullying. Such rules may include a commitment from the teacher *not to look the other way* when bullying incidents occur.
- Develop a classroom action plan so that students know what to do when they witness a bullying incident.
- Teach cooperation by assigning projects that require cooperation and teamwork. For example, high school students act as tutors, mentors, or role models to younger students to enhance the younger students' ability to make better personal and behavioral decisions.
- Take immediate action when bullying is observed or reported. By taking immediate action and dealing directly with the bully, adults support both the target and the witnesses.
- Confront bullies in private. Engaging the bully in front of peers may enhance the bully's status and power or lead to further aggression.
- Notify parents of both the bully and the target and try to resolve the problems as soon as possible, including referrals to counseling when appropriate.

- Provide protection for students who may be targeted by bullies. One measure might include creating a buddy system to reduce the risk of attack or ridicule of the targeted student.
- Incorporate activities that foster mutual understanding and appreciation, such as research projects or invitations to guest speakers.
- Avoid attempts at mediating between the bully and the target. When someone bullies, the problem is more than a difference of *opinion*; it is a difference of *power*. Bullies may use the mediation process to persuade the targeted person that he / she is somehow at fault for the attack.

Actions for Students

STUDENTS who are the target of bullying or who witness incidents of bullying often do not know how to react. They experience feelings of guilt, hurt, and stress along with the fear of revealing the experience to anyone. Classroom discussion and activities that help students learn how to react appropriately and safely may help them develop a variety of responses and a level of comfort in getting through such experiences. The following suggestions for students are designed to help foster appropriate responses:

- Try to avoid engaging in acts of bullying and seek help from an adult.
- Report bullying incidents you witness at school to an adult.
- Encourage others to report bullying incidents and help them report if they cannot do it alone.
- Support someone who has been hurt by offering kind words in private and helping them through the next steps.
- Show your disappointment in the behavior by not joining in while someone publicly humiliates, teases, or harasses another and do not participate in the gossip or rumors being spread.

Actions for Families

PARENTS and guardians strive to develop a child's confidence and independence to ensure the child's success throughout life. These qualities also protect the child against being victimized at school. However, when their child is the victim of bullying, parents / guardians must offer to support their child and take action as needed. Families may take the following actions after a child has experienced conflict or confrontation with a bully at school:

- Convince the child who has been the target of a bully that he / she is not at fault, that the bully's behavior is the problem.

- Convince the child that everyone is entitled to respect and that he/she does not deserve being bullied.
- Work *with* the school staff to address a bullying problem whether as an advocate for the bully or the targeted student. Keep accurate records of incidents and be specific about the child's experiences when discussing resolution of the problem with school personnel.
- Note that meeting with the family of a bully may be difficult as family members may interpret the child's behavior as "standing up for himself/herself." However, asking for a meeting that includes the child's teacher, the school principal, or the school counselor may lead to practical advice or intervention that will assist both the family of the target and the family of the bully with issues and interventions that can lead to resolution of the problem.
- Teach the child to be assertive without striking out. This action sends the bully the message that his/her attempts to threaten or intimidate are not having the desired effect and reduces the chances that the bully will continue to single out the confident, assertive child.

Although schoolyard bullies have existed throughout history, not until the mid-1970s was there an effort to understand bullying and its impact on children. It was assumed that coping with bullies was simply a part of growing up. In the early 1980s media reports of two teenage boys committing suicide as a result of severe bullying aroused interest from the general public and the media. In October 2000 the *Chicago Sun-Times* published "Deadly Lessons: School Shooters Tell Why," which reported the results of a study conducted by the U.S. Secret Service.²⁰ The study described 41 children involved in 37 school shootings across America between 1974 and 2000. A common thread among most of the youths was bullying. Two-thirds of the attackers described feeling persecuted, bullied, or threatened—not teased, but tormented.

Bullying can be stopped with careful and sensitive interventions. The strategies presented in these guidelines will encourage the school community to recognize the benefits of identifying and addressing bullying behavior. A reduction in school bullying not only improves the quality of the school campus and its students but also translates to higher test scores and improved academic achievement.

²⁰ "Deadly Lessons: School Shooters Tell Why," *Chicago Sun Times*, October 15–16, 2000.